



THE
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SOMETHING IN THE CITY

Roland Jeffery

In 1976 the Georgian Group teamed up with the other leading amenity societies to produce 'Save the City', a detailed report advocating far-reaching overhaul of the City of London's conservation policies. It was a well-argued case of the sort that helped establish the 1980s as the 'Conservation Decade'. It was widely read and was reprinted in 1979, expanded. Ten years on, does the City Corporation — that most improbable of English local authorities, and certainly the one with the sparsest electorate — give cause for hope that its unique architectural heritage will be well looked after?

Well, the Wren churches, livery halls, St Paul's and the handful of surviving eighteenth century houses are mostly not under imminent threat of demolition or decay, and many are lovingly cared for. There have been justifiable alarms, such as that at Wren's St Stephen's Walbrook, where the relentlessly active churchwarden Peter Palumbo presided over re-ordering, tactless re-fitting and the installation of the now notorious 'cheese' where an altar might have been. But the 1980s were on the whole more encouraging in the City than the destructive 1970s had been for buildings of the Group's traditional period. The concern today must be largely with classically-inspired buildings of a later date.

Whether modest commercial buildings and warehouses deriving subtly proportioned facades from classical precept, or the grander exemplars of the enduring classical tradition — such as banks and insurance houses boasting giant orders and coffered lobby ceilings — the City has a rich heritage of classical buildings of the last 100 years. Many have recently gone, and very many others face an uncertain future.

The arguments have been as much about economics as history, architecture or aesthetics, and they began with the Draft Revised City Plan published in November 1984. This acknowledged the City's commercial and financial importance but saw conservation matters as important too. In particular, it advocated the retention of non-listed buildings in Conservation Areas (which cover about 25% of the City) and, further, proposed a 'local list' of buildings which although neither statutorily listed nor in a Conservation Area the City would nevertheless seek to retain if possible. Lacking a full statutory basis for this last objective, saving the buildings might not always be possible, but the Plan offered the City Corporation a bargaining tool, and was a declaration of intent. Moreover, a 100% survey of the pre-1939 buildings had shown many of them to be of both townscape and architectural merit.

The Draft Plan was greeted by a sustained campaign of opposition in which the loudest public voices were leading firms of City estate agents. They argued that the de-regulation of the Stock Exchange ('Big Bang') meant that the stock of existing offices was becoming increasingly out of date. Larger buildings were needed, with much larger undivided floors for densely occupied open-plan offices, known as banking factories. The floor-to-ceiling height was said to be inadequate for the huge amount of cabling which modern financial institutions, with their vast number of computers, need. They wanted massively increased air conditioning to cool the hardware, and completely flexible interiors. There can be little doubt that these needs existed, but arguments as to why wholesale demolition was necessary instead of careful refurbishment were very sketchily put.

Apart from these practicalities, the value of property was an issue. As the Estates Gazette noted in an Editorial criticising the Draft Plan for its conservation emphasis, property with 'redevelopment potential . . . could be particularly prone to changes of value due to the Plan policies'. In other words, the development bonanza could be slowed by conservation

considerations, and those who were speculating on wholesale redevelopment of City sites might lose money.

Nobody could dispute that economic changes were indeed taking place, or that part of the boom in London was fuelled by property investment, not least in sites in the City of London itself, which are a benchmark for 'prime' offices. But the conclusion of the campaign against the Draft City Plan was that it was modified to become a much more development-orientated document. The local 'list' of pre-1939 buildings was dropped altogether. Large parts of the City outside existing Conservation Areas were signalled as ripe for development. A new Chairman of the Planning Committee, Councilman Michael Cassidy, was voted in amid this anti-conservation fervour and a new Controller of Planning, Peter Rees, was appointed in succession to the former conservation-minded City Architect and Planner, who resigned. And the planning applications flooded in. Peter Rees publicly gave voice to the moment: 'We are ready, willing and able to meet the challenge in a flexible manner'. Subsequently there have been many losses, and an astonishingly large number of good, and in some cases outstanding, buildings are under threat, with planning consents which may be acted on any day.

Just a few examples indicate the scope of the threat. The work in the City of Sir Albert Richardson, one of our greatest twentieth century architects, has suffered badly. His Moorgate Hall in Moorgate (1915) was tragically demolished in 1988, and Stone House, Bishopsgate (1927), on the corner with Houndsditch, is under immediate threat of redevelopment. Moorgate Hall was a handsome building and truly representative of the stripped classicism of the early years of this century. Richardson's Bracken House, formerly the offices of The Financial Times and the only building by him in the City to be listed, has been partly saved. This has led to its two principal facades being incorporated into the new building now being erected on the site. But the listing came at the eleventh hour, after the City Corporation had already given consent for demolition, and reputedly wiped tens of millions off the value of the building, which had just been bought for a record sum by Japanese investors. To its purchasers it was merely a development site and as good as cleared. Indeed, rescue was only possible because the Department of the Environment had just changed the rules, allowing twentieth century buildings to be listable on reaching their thirtieth birthday.

Plans to demolish Richardson's distinguished office additions to Trinity House (1955)



Fig. 1. Woodruffe House (right) and Trinity House extension, both by Sir Albert Richardson, 1955 (photo: Roland Jeffery).

have very recently been approved. The two blocks, Woodruffe House (Fig. 1) and Pepys House, were erected when Trinity House itself was repaired by Richardson after wartime damage. Having persuaded the Trustees to restore Wyatt's eighteenth century shell, something they were initially reluctant to do, he added the Conference Room to the main frontage in a more frankly neo-classical style, and the taller offices behind. The two offices are separate elements but linked visually and literally to the older building, and the whole ensemble is a highly successful contextual infill of a kind which might usefully be emulated elsewhere in the City. The pared-down classical language, careful use of brick and stone and recessed upper storey (a late Richardson trademark, the best example of which is at Bracken House) of the offices sit superbly well within this tight city block. They should have been preserved as a coherent and successful group. The offices are about to be demolished and a mediocre post-modern hulk put in its place.

Many humbler buildings with decent features have gone, even in Conservation Areas. Lovat Lane, a narrow street curving down to the river at Billingsgate, is a case in point. It lies within the St Mary at Hill Conservation Area, and was until recent years largely lined with modest commercial buildings and warehouses — Georgian, Victorian and early twentieth century, mostly flat-fronted, of load-bearing brick, and plainly indicating both the familiarity of their designers with classical principles and the connections of their occupants with river-borne trade, carried on here since Roman times. This street today boasts a bizarre collection of small new offices, whose facades have to be seen to be believed. This is the result of a policy which allows demolition in Conservation Areas 'if the proposed replacement enhances the special architectural or historical character of the area.' It is, however, very difficult to see how the showy brickwork, ostentatious baubles and curlicues (Fig. 2) of most of the new buildings enhance the street; they certainly ignore its history. 'Enhancing the character' is here taken to

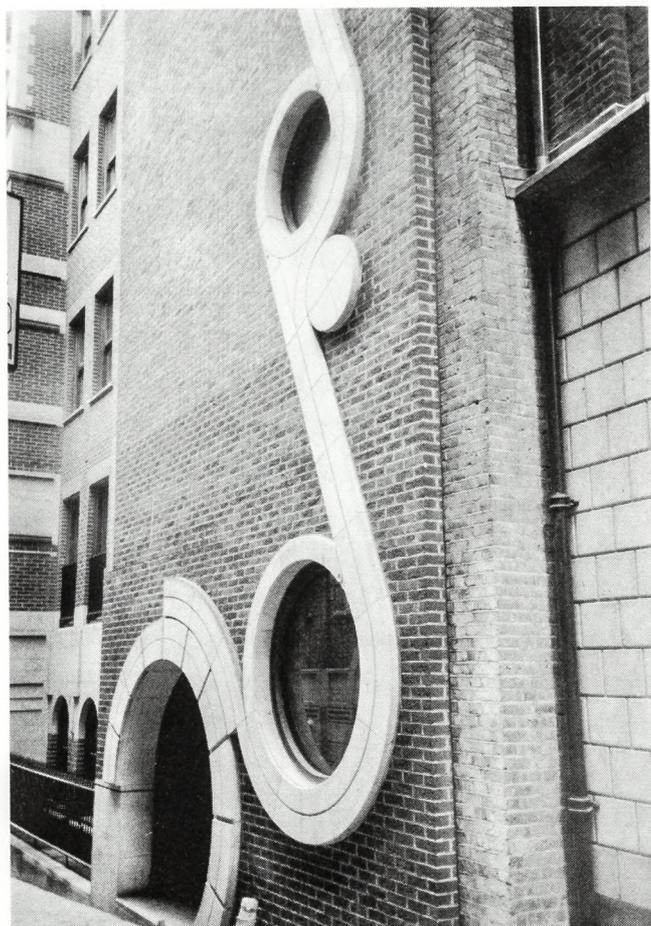


Fig. 2. Recent detailing in Lovat Lane (photo: Roland Jeffery).



Fig. 3. St Martin's House (centre), St Martin's le Grand (photo: Roland Jeffery).

be a matter of loud architectural display. Surely the conservationist approach of refurbishment and adaptation would here have been both feasible and preferable.

'Spot' listing has saved St Martin's House (Fig. 3), at 16 St Martins Le Grand (1927, by Sylvester Sullivan, with very fine carving by Henry Poole, otherwise best known for his bucolic pub interior at The Black Friar), after consent for a new building had been given by the City. This is an individual and most successful reworking of classical themes, its broad pilaster strips-cum-walls perfectly expressing both the steel structure of the building and layout of the office floors within whilst presenting a facade to the street which is at the same time vital and dignified.

The Kuwaiti developers of this and several adjoining sites saw it merely as a block of city real estate and sought to demolish everything on it. It remains to be seen whether the listing of St Martin's House will save the other adjoining buildings, which though less radical and refined in their deployment of classical elements nevertheless make a good ensemble and a highly suitable setting for St Martin's House. Sylvester Sullivan was also the architect of 37–39 Lime Street, opposite Lloyd's of London. It too has been recently listed, but one cannot forget that Richard Rogers' Lloyd's stands on the site of Edwin Cooper's classical masterpiece, once both loved and listed, and now demolished, along with its Lutyens War Memorial. Nor can one forget that the then Chairman of Lloyd's was so proud of this act of destruction that he posed gleefully for the cameras, striking the first blow with a demolition hammer even before Listed Building Consent had been granted — a potent symbol of the pro-development ethos in the Square Mile.

Last minute 'spot' listing saved Sir Edward Cooper's Inchcape building at 40 St Mary's Axe, a few yards from Lloyd's; it is now being refurbished. Inchcape's stood, just four years ago, in a virtually intact street of commercial buildings. These dated from the reconstruction of the street in the 1890s after a devastating fire through to the 1930s. The buildings were of modest height, all of them classical, but distinct in their interpretations. They included a fine bank by J. MacVicar Anderson; an office by W. D. Caroe; and an especially typical commercial classical building of the early 1930s by the commercial firm of Joseph's. They represented the development of the continuing classical tradition during the years when it is too often assumed to have declined or become worthless. All of these buildings and half of the others in the street have since been demolished. Inchcape's, the lucky survivor, will shortly be surrounded almost entirely by rebuilding, most of it mediocre. St Mary's Axe had been a fine piece of townscape in a mature commercial quarter, and the City Corporation has apparently been happy to see it destroyed.

The safeguarding of buildings through listing has had some success, and is clearly to be encouraged. The Georgian Group's sister society The Thirties Society (which in spite of its name is concerned with the whole of the twentieth century after 1914) has been to the fore in several important battles in the City. But isolated good buildings rescued and then beached amidst fast-track developer's architecture is not what one wants at the heart of our capital city. Groups of buildings and streetscapes can count for almost as much. Three buildings in Leadenhall Street are a case in point. The former Bank of Canada (Fig. 4) of 1927 by New York architect J. W. O'Connor is a very good front with delicate Adamesque carving. Its use of a triumphal arch motif around the entrance was even more common in New York and Chicago commercial architecture than it was in the work of the brothers Adam. It is not listed and must therefore be regarded as potentially under threat. Its neighbour was a good brick neo-Georgian building of 1925 by Josephs. It was demolished last year. Lutyens' Midland Bank of 1927 (more modest in scale than its parent in Princes Street, but with many similar details) had been the third of the fine ensemble. One flank of the Lutyens building is permanently exposed, in the same way that the other flank now is until rebuilding is complete. The roof-top pavilions, charming when glimpsed over the cornice line from the street, are



Fig. 4. Former Bank of Canada, Leadenhall Street, by J. W. O'Connor, 1927 (photo: Roland Jeffery).



Fig. 5. Plantation House, Fenchurch Street, by A. W. Moore, 1934 (photo: Roland Jeffery).

now permanently diminished by over-exposure when one looks along Leadenhall Street due to the City's insensitive and unnecessary road widening.

Plantation House in Fenchurch Street (Fig. 5), with its double tiers of giant orders, introduces some of the grandeur achieved by American architects in commercial buildings of the late 1920s and 1930s. In the USA two giant orders often comprised the 'plinth' of a skyscraper, which after a set-back would then soar further upwards for thirty or more storeys. Plantation House stops at a modest eight — a more suitable height for London. It occupies the greater part of a sizeable city block and has three street frontages. In its scale, multi-occupation tenure and flexibility it is in some ways a prototype for the banking factories which have proliferated in London after the Big Bang. However, its architectural language is greatly more civilised than most of the recent examples, and it is popular with occupiers. It conveys prestige on the businesses it houses, whilst being a good neighbour to surrounding buildings. It should be saved.

There have been too many losses, and too many good buildings are at risk. The pro-development boom has led to the position in 1990 of many predicting a serious surplus of new offices in the Square Mile. The lesson is surely that the twentieth century classical buildings of the City deserve the interest of members of the Georgian Group. A highly successful members' walk around such buildings was held in 1989, organised jointly with the Thirties Society, and led by that Society's Chairman Dr. Gavin Stamp. The continuing classical tradition in architecture is splendidly represented in the City, and at a time when conservation priorities for the buildings of this century need to be sorted out, lovers of classicism — whether scholars, practitioners or amateurs — should stand up and be counted.